

How we can teach children about race and why it is important that we do

Contributors name:

Mel Green

Contributors name:

SPEAKER 1: Thank you very much. OK, so good morning, everyone, and welcome to this Black History Month event titled, How to Teach Children about Race, and Why It's Important that We Do. So my name is Sas, and I'm delighted to introduce our presenter, Mel Green.

Mel is a lecturer in education studies, and associate lecturer, and a third-year professional doctoral researcher at the Open University. Her research explores the intersections of Open University practitioners, personal and professional identities, and the effect of intersections that these have on their online teaching practices. She is also involved in research and scholarship at the Open University that centres experiences of students of colour at the university as well as anti-racist teaching practices.

So today, Mel's presentation explores how children and young people learn about the constructions of race and racism from early socialization. She'll be discussing ways that adults can approach racial dialogues with young people and how this will benefit children and their families in the long term.

So this event will run for about 45 minutes till about quarter 2 and is being recorded. But if we publish on OpenLearn, we won't include the Q&A. And the presentation itself will run for about 35 minutes, and then after that, there'll be an opportunity to ask questions. But feel free to pop any questions that spring to mind during the presentation in the chat, and I will get round to asking those later. So thank you all very much. It's going to be really interesting, and I'm handing over to you, Mel.

MEL GREEN: Hi, welcome, thank you, Seth. That was actually really lovely, very professional. Yeah, welcome, and thank you so much for joining me today. Babette, would you please go to the next slide? Thank you. OK, so Seth did a wonderful job of introducing me, and there's not much else to add other than I've worked with children in my professional career literally since I started working. So from the age of 18 onwards, I've worked with children.

This has been the longest time working in higher education that I haven't worked directly with children. I've been a former nursery assistant, youth worker, special needs assistant, and primary school teacher, and have worked with children across the age range of 0 to actually 19.

I've also taught children in South America, which is a wonderful thing to do, and I have my own two children who are aged 5 and 3. And I just wanted to state that, to say that I'm coming from a place that is interested in children.

And as a Black woman, my positionality is that race is really important to the development of children, mainly children of colour, but also white children, as well. I've written about this, and you can find my article on OpenLearn. And it's called, How Do Children Learn the Concept of Race? Can we have the next slide, please, Babette?

OK, this is just a placeholder. We're going to talk about race and the definition of race, which is important, but it really does provide you with an understanding of where this is coming from. So next slide, please.

So as we should know, if you've been to any of the events so far during this Black History month, we should know that race is a social construct. So it's characterized as we understand it as being based on physical appearance, such as skin colour, but there is no biological basis for this.

And lots of researchers have proven this time and time again, that there is a social basis, however, and that is where we get the term, social construction, from. These racial distinctions, the difference between Black and white, are woven into our everyday. So we are able to identify someone walking down the street as being Black or being white and other racial distinctions.

And it's for that reason that it's become a significant factor in how we organize social life and how society is organized. So we should really see race as a verb, as a doing word.

Racialization is the meaning that we place on racial identities.

So these are actual neutral identities, and they've been created as racialized in order to create a social order. And so from that, from racialization, is where we get this system of racism, and this is a system in which white groups and those adjacent to white groups are placed in positions of power over other races.

So hopefully, this is what we can understand as being race and racism. And so we're not getting linked into the whole interchangeability between race and ethnicity, and we're understanding race as this, yes, social imagination that has actually made something very real, and that is racism. OK, so next slide, please, Babette.

When we're talking about race with regards to children, it becomes quite a contentious discussion. And so I want to address the misconceptions of adults, and their beliefs, and how this affects children. Next slide, please.

So we get a lot of adults that will be really try to avoid talking about race with children. The first statement that usually comes up is, children don't even notice race. If we talk about it, we might make them racist by addressing this, so this idea that children are pure, and innocent, and have no concept of race as children. And so we don't want to talk about it because that highlights it to them.

A program in America found that actually, when younger children try to discuss race with their parents, that they were often silenced. So children actually do bring this up to their parents and find themselves silenced by their parents, because the parents don't really want to discuss it for fear of saying something wrong, for fear of making them racist.

So we call this colour evasiveness. And I want to make it clear that we're calling it colour evasiveness rather than colour blindness after speaking to a wonderful lady called Liz Pemberton. She is a Black nursery manager. I talked to her about my presentation slide and had the words, colour blindness, on this slide, and it was her that highlighted that colour blindness is actually quite an ableist term, and it makes light of blindness as a disability. So we came up with the term together of colour evasiveness, avoiding talking about colour.

So another statement that parents often make with regard to talking to children about race is that it's only necessary to talk about race with children once they've formed an opinion, and they've begun talking about it. However, children begin to display bias and unconscious bias quite early on without talking about it, without the ability to talk about it. So again, it is a parent's responsibility to bring this up to children.

Another discussion that I've heard people say to me is that talking about race itself is a very negative thing to do, and it's actually more harmful than helpful to discuss race. Again, I will discuss in this presentation why that's not quite correct.

And finally, probably the biggest one that we hear a lot with regards to race is that we're all human, and so children shouldn't be made to notice other people's differences. However, children do. Children often notice a difference about each other quite early on.

My own children, so my two-- well, my three-year-old who's recently turned three, at the age of two, was talking to me about his friends at his nursery and the difference in their colour, the difference in their hair, the difference in their gender. Children notice differences because they're trying to place themselves in the world. OK, next slide, please.

So the evidence, well, I'm saying that children need to talk about race, that children develop biases early on. Where's the evidence for this? I'm going to present this to you now. Please, next slide, please.

So children actually have demonstrated a significant preference for faces from their own ethnic group at the age as young as three months old. So this is an age where they cannot speak, where they haven't had discussions about race with their families because they're babies, but they have shown in these studies a real significant bias for looking at faces from their own ethnic group.

And researchers from University of Toronto, the US, the UK, France, China, have also all found that six- to nine-month-olds demonstrate racial bias in favour of members of their own race and racial bias against members of other races. So in a study in Toronto, the research really showed that six-month-olds began to associate faces from their own race with happy music and those from other races with sad music, showing a racial bias.

And we're going to look in this study in more detail, but hopefully some of you may have heard of a study by Clark and Clark called the doll studies. And this very famous study showed that children were able to racially identify by the age of three.

And by preschool-- oh, sorry, this is the last one we have. Thanks, Babette. And by preschool, those racial bias were shown to have clear racial preferences with the types of friends children chose in preschool. So we're looking at from not newborn but very close to, three months old, to preschool. So before we think children are complex enough to start discussing race, they've already developed racial bias and racial preferences. OK, next slide, please, Babette.

Brilliant, so this video is just a very small excerpt of an example of a doll study. It's not the original doll study, but the doll study experiments were by Mamie and Kenneth Clark, a married couple, in the late 1930s and 1940s, which was developed from their own need to demonstrate a racial discrimination where they were able to demonstrate pro-white bias with Black children, and with a lot of children but within Black children cells, varying across ages.

And so this study was repeated between 1939, and 1977, and actually beyond, which I'll talk about in a while, with more than 30 studies conducted using the same procedure and variations of the procedure, which found exactly the same thing, this pro-white bias existing within Black children. So Babette, would you please play the video?

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

INTERVIEWER: Which doll is the Black doll?

CHILD 1: This one.

INTERVIEWER: And which one is the white doll?

CHILD 2: That one.

INTERVIEWER: Which doll is the pretty doll?

CHILD 3: [points at white doll]

INTERVIEWER: Which the doll is the nice doll?

CHILD 4: [points at white doll]

INTERVIEWER: Which doll is the bad doll?

CHILD 3: [points at black doll]

INTERVIEWER: Which doll is the nice doll?

CHILD 5: [points at white doll]

INTERVIEWER: And which doll is the bad doll?

CHILD 6: [points at black doll]

INTERVIEWER: And why is that doll pretty?

CHILD 7: Because she's white and she have blue eyes.

INTERVIEWER: Which doll is the ugly doll? Why is that doll ugly?

CHILD 7: Because he's Black.

INTERVIEWER: Which doll looks most like you?

SPEAKER 8: Like me?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, which one looks like you?

SPEAKER 8: That one.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

SPEAKER 8: That doll.

MEL GREEN: OK, so I've actually just accessed the chat, and yeah, it gets my, I don't know, hackles raised. I get goosebumps every time I watch it. I find it quite harrowing that children that young-- and you can also see the sadness in those children. They are saying things like that doll was the ugly doll, but they are also identifying with that doll. And these are four-year-olds in that video. Can we have the next slide, please, Babette?

So as I mentioned, the doll study is really-- it's a very famous study. It makes the use of quite forced choice questions, and it did focus solely on the Black-white dichotomy. And it was also in quite a controlled and natural environment, which led to research that was varied where they varied the skin tones, where they used different ethnicities, where they used interviews, where they observed children's play. And they found exactly the same kind of bias.

Now, the play of young children is them re-enacting society. So when children are really young, play is work to them. And so when they re-enact those discourses, we can understand that they are re-enacting what they're learning.

The most recent doll study that I could find was actually in 2021, and that study was done with four-year-olds again. And they chose two Black girls, and they were given four dolls-- a white doll, one that represented Latina; a Black doll with lighter skin; and a Black doll with medium skin. And they chose to observe them playing, so it was play in action. And they just observed them. They didn't ask them any questions about it until after the play.

But the Black girls rarely chose the Black dolls to play with, and when they chose the Black dolls, they mistreated them. So they stepped on them, they poked them, they put them in holes. One of the girls pretended to cook them, cooked the babies. And they also reported things like distress at the Black dolls' hair, saying it's too big or it's too curly.

And so these findings for me and for the researchers reveal this really complex, incredibly complex but active process, where these children are forming their feelings, and their desires, and their understandings, and their enactment of race.

So it's a real, deep-rooted-- because four years old, only being in the world for four years, and to have that experience or have that feeling towards Blackness, it's overwhelming, I think. And obviously, it's still demonstrating this pro-white bias. OK, next slide, please, Babette.

OK, so where does this come from essentially? If these children are as innocent-- they've only been in this world for four years, yet somehow, they are showing bias, they're showing preferences, and they're showing a form of racism. So how are they doing this? Where is this coming from? Next slide, please, Babette.

So initially, the first few studies that tried to explain how children are developing racial biases and racial preferences focused on cognitive development. As I was saying earlier, children notice sameness. My own child noticed sameness and difference very early on. He was noticing this at two years old.

But Piaget, those of you who are educationalists or work with children in some way will know about Piaget and his stages of cognitive development. So the preoperational stage for Jean Piaget came in around three to five years old. And so at this point, they're distinguishing the meaning of colours that they apply to objects, the social meaning of colours when applied to race.

They're also going through the experience of in-group, out-group, and multi-group memberships. So they're really starting to know which group that they belong to, which group they don't belong to, and that could explain it.

There's also the point that at five to eight years old, they develop a maturity of their cognitive capacities, and they start showing signs of moral thought, which is essential for socialization. So at this point, children start to learn the rules for games, and these rules often approximate the norms of society.

So this is where you start noticing that children start saying, you can't do that. That's not fair. And they start to actually display punitive and rigid attitudes, judging wrongdoing based solely on the outcomes of acts rather than the intent of actors.

So this cognitive development idea is useful when we're thinking about peer interaction and learning in school settings, but it's not helpful in understanding the social, cultural, and

economic context that are critical for racial socialization. So next question-- oh, sorry, next slide.

It's really important, well, for me, but also when I was talking to Liz Pemberton, who is known as the Black nursery manager, to really consider Black maternal health as well when we're thinking about how children have this socialized from a very early age.

If we think that Black women are more than four times more likely to experience a pregnancy-related death than compared to white women, they're also more likely to experience preventable maternal death compared with white women, and heightened risk of pregnancy-related injury, pregnancy-related disease, as well, and that this spans income and education levels. So it's not the saying the poorer you are, the more uneducated you are, that it's going to affect you. This literally spans those variables.

They're more likely to experience maternal health complications afterwards and during, and also, Black women, because of their experiences of the world, experience physical weathering. That means their bodies age faster. This is often due to exposure of chronic stress from socioeconomic disadvantage but also the psychological disadvantage of being a Black woman.

So I highlight this primarily to show that trauma actually begins during birth for Black children. So during being in your mother's womb, you've already experienced more trauma than a white child. So next slide, please.

OK, so one of the things that is important to highlight with Black children or children who are of colour, that there is a practice that happens within these families that may go unnoticed. It's a common practice within ethnic minority families, and it's about teaching those children within those families about race, about ethnicity and about racial discrimination. And most ethnic minority families probably don't even realize that they're doing it.

So this research came from a person called Hughes in 2006. And it basically emerged around 25 years ago, and it's concentrated on these four main areas. So that's cultural socialization, which is about promoting things like cultural pride, teaching cultural knowledge, and the traditions within the family. And there's preparation for bias, which is preparing your children for discrimination and how to cope with it.

There's also this promotion of mistrust of other racial groups. So this idea of communicating a need for wariness or distrust, and often comes with not offering advice for coping with it but just promoting a mistrust of those groups. And then the final one is egalitarianism, and that is promotion of values that focus on shared commonalities between racial groups and focuses on the colour evasiveness that we were talking about before.

So while most studies have focused on ethnic minority families when it comes to ethnic racial socialization, there's been recent studies that have found that white families also do this. And that they often focus more on either the communication of a promotion of mistrust or the focus on egalitarianism.

Now, all of this ethnic-racial socialization is relevant for the development of a positive racial identity, and this is what we're going to go and talk about next in the next slide, please. OK, sorry, we're not going to talk about it just yet. I want to talk about the transmitters of those, that ethnic-racial socialization, so the people who provide that socialization.

And the first transmitters are your parents, and that makes sense because they're the first mode of socialization that we have. So white parents of children of colour-- so that's children who are interracial usually and who have white parents, but also children who are adopted, so Black or Brown children who are adopted by white parents-- these studies have found that these white parents are less likely to engage in ethnic racial socialization, and they focus instead on maintaining interracial harmony.

Parents of the ethnic minority children who have experienced racial discrimination before are the ones more likely to promote ethnic racial pride and preparation for bias messages.

Parents that have recently immigrated to the country, they are the ones that tend to focus on cultural traditions, and they're more likely to do that than parents who have settled here for a longer time.

Now, another form of that socialization comes from extended families and wider community, but they often provide conflicting messages. So you often get conflicting messages from, say, your neighbours, maybe, than you would your aunts and uncles. So that creates a confusion for children, especially at times when they're creating or developing their identity. In neighbourhoods with higher levels of racial discrimination, parents tend to have more discussions about race and use more cultural socialization messages in coping with discrimination messages.

And then by the time a child's in school and then moving into adolescence when they've got increased autonomy, they have all that identity crisis that's going on, they're also more susceptible to more racial stresses. So school-based racial discrimination. And this is at a time when schools are more likely to use a colour evasive approach, so they avoid racial topics and racial discussions in school. But teachers actually provide a really important role when it comes to teaching children about culture and racial diversity.

One of the things that's not mentioned within these studies or not really focused on that much within these studies is the media, so I'm going to highlight that next. Sorry, thank you for that. So media representation about Black people is often quite a negative experience. I'm just going to go through these pictures. Negative associations are often exaggerated, so when we

talk about Black boys, for example, we're often talking about Black boys in the context of gangs and drugs.

We also have missing stories. This is a wonderful picture from-- hopefully, some of you may have heard of Marcus Garvey Day Nursery, which was an incredible nursery in Birmingham, but I found out about that about a year ago, Marcus Garvey Day Nursery because these are the types of positive stories that are missing from the media.

Positive associations are often limited. When you have a wonderful event like Notting Hill Carnival, we don't often talk about the positivity of Notting Hill Carnival. We talk about the crime that happens at the carnival. And Black people are often created-- often framed, sorry, within the media as being problematic. So Black Lives Matters protests, the media was often looking for crime related to that rather than the peaceful protests that were taking place.

As we've seen recently with the Little Mermaid, the live-action Little Mermaid retelling, there was under-representation in media portrayals of Black people, and so much so that it creates a furor when a Black actress represents a fictional mermaid and with people saying things it's not scientifically possible, but being a mermaid apparently is.

And we also have the incorrect assumptions about what audiences want. If we think about the makeup industry, for years, the makeup industry said that Black women didn't buy makeup, and then we had the great success of Rihanna's Fenty Beauty makeup line.

We also have the masculinization and defeminisation of Black women, where they're either presented to be in line with men, looking like men, if we think about Serena Williams and Michelle Obama. We also have the adultification of children where they are presented as being more mature, more capable, than children of the same age who are white.

And we also have the tragedy/exceptional dichotomy, where you are either a very successful Black person or you're a tragic Black person. And I've got the examples here of Lewis-- I've forgotten his name. Oh my goodness, I've forgotten his name. The car driving guy, Lewis. I've got Lewis Carroll in my head, but I—

SPEAKER 7: Hamilton.

SPEAKER 8: Hamilton.

Thank you, thank you very much. Lewis Hamilton, thank you. And I don't know where that came from. Lewis Hamilton, who is a very successful Black man, but I've also got a picture there of George Floyd's mother, and that's often the only time we see mothers, Black

mothers, in the media, is when they're experiencing tragedy. So media representations of Black people are not in great condition, as we can see. Next slide, please.

So what does this do? What does all this socialization do if we don't have positive representations of children in the media, in schools, we avoid colour? I want to just very briefly—

I'm going to stop this video halfway through because it is quite a long video, but I want to just go straight into this video. And this actually made me cry the first time I saw it. So hopefully, trigger warning. Yeah, if you press play for me, Babette, that'd be great, thanks.

LILWAVEDADDY: For real, like, I'm not even playing with you. You won't even like it if--

ARIYONNA: I'm so ugly.

LILWAVEDADDY: Don't say that. Don't say that. Don't say that. You are so pretty.

SPEAKER 9: That is--

LILWAVEDADDY: You are-- shut up, go in the room. When you look at yourself, you are going to say, I am so pretty. You are so pretty. Do you hear me? You got the prettiest little dimples. You are too cute.

[CRYING]

Don't you-- you're going to make me cry. You're not ugly. You're not.

MEL GREEN: It does the same thing to me as the doll video, a child just having her hair done, just saying that whatever happened, she's still ugly, which is what Black children learn about themselves because of things like the media but also thinking about their experiences as well of school, of their neighborhoods, as we've just discussed.

So Black children can learn that they're not attractive, that they're naughty, that they're older than they look and therefore they're not innocent or as innocent as their white peers, and they're not worthy, and that they deserve some sort of mistreatment. Next slide, please, Babette.

So the real important and the positive racial development of Black children, speaking specifically about Black children right now, and Black children who identify less with their race actually do worse academically, and they feel the impacts of racial discrimination more than those who have developed a positive racial identity.

And positive racial identity then leads to positive impact on education with regards to attainment and grades. And finally, overall psychological well-being is increased if children and young people develop positive racial development. OK, so next slide, please.

So what can we do to support that positive racial development? Next slide, please, Babette. Now, I've got a selection of books. I could have gone for miles. Our library of Black literature

in this house is extensive, but there are so many books that you can find that talk about race with children in a really appropriate and accessible way.

My favourite is, *My Skin, Your Skin*, which is by Laura Henry-Allaine, and she's really prominent on Twitter as well. But also, there's a book there called, *I Am Every Good Thing*, which is basically a fantastic book for Black boys specifically that is basically an affirming and really positive and beautiful book.

But there are so many out there. Reading those sorts of books, even if you belong in a white family, having those sorts of books in your house is a really great representation for your children to see positive representations of Black people.

But ways to support racial identity development and discourage racism with Black adults is by modelling your own positive racial identity. My children know how much I love my locks, and I talk about how much I care for them because they are a part of my identity. And showing your own comfort and own empathy towards yourself as Black people allows children to model that behaviour. My youngest son has very Afro hair, and he always says that his hair is beautiful.

And non-Black people should be really conscious of their actions-- I'm sorry, of their attitudes, their behaviours, and their language about Black people, and they need to learn how to advocate for others instead of withdrawing. So if you see negative behaviours from other people, that you highlight that to your children. You don't just try to ignore it.

Also, using children's spontaneous remarks about their others physical appearances as opportunities to explain away race-related traits such as skin colour, and what they mean, and what they don't mean.

So my youngest, again, he talked about how his skin-- now, he's a mixed race. His skin is different from his daddy's skin, and his skin's different from his mummy's skin, and how he would like it to be the same as his best friend, and his best friend is white. And I use that example to talk about how we want to be the same as the people that are close to us, but actually, noticing our differences and being proud of that is a really good way for you understanding what makes you you.

Now, he wasn't necessarily saying, I want to be white. He was saying, I want to be like my friend, which is two different things, but it's really important to have those conversations and start those developmental understanding of race early on.

Helping children to interpret and challenge the media that they can consume, so talking about things like Black Lives Matter protests in ways that are accessible, and understandable, and taking away from a lot of the negativity is a really important thing to do as well.

Representation, as I said, positive representation in books like this, CBeebies has a wonderful show called JoJo and Gran Gran for children who are really young that is just beautiful. Next slide, please.

Furthermore, within our roles as ALs, those of you who are ALs here, or educators, or practitioners in any way, making sure that you are making more use of Black resources, of Black literature, Black stories, Black images within your model materials, your curriculum, and your school libraries, affirming Black children-- oh god, I've talked so long. I'm so sorry.

Affirming Black children and owning their Blackness is really important. Also changing our policy as well. Now, back to why it matters-- it's a really great non-statutory guidance for early years that does say that talking about race is the first step to countering racism.

And employing anti-racist practices, so Liz Pemberton is a great example of how to do that within early years. Phoenix talks about this in higher education. And also, hearing Black voices, so actually speaking, coming to sessions like this where you're hearing Black people talk about experiences, but also going beyond Black History Month. Don't just stop here. It's beyond Black History month. It's a whole-year round, activity that we should be doing.

We should be ending there. Sorry, next slide, Babette. I've talked for miles. Let's just forget this video because I did want to leave room for Q&A, and I have talked to her a long time, which I said I was going to do that. I did say that. I was honest about it.